

SERMON: At All Times and In All Ways
TEXT: 1 Peter 3:8-17

10-3-21

I learned something new this week! Nearly 80 years ago, in 1933, World Communion Sunday began in a Presbyterian Church in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. “It was their attempt to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity - in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, they know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another.”

It is a miracle of God that an idea conceived in a single congregation would become a worldwide, ecumenical, annual event. Three years later, in 1936, celebration of World Wide Communion Sunday [as it was named at the time] was adopted as a denominational practice in the Presbyterian Church (US), more commonly known as “the northern church.” Churches of other denominations were invited from the beginning, but it wasn’t until 1940 that the practice became widespread. That year, the Federal Council of Churches (predecessor to the National Council of Churches) promoted extending the celebration to a number of churches around the world.

The son of the pastor of that Pittsburgh church interpreted the spread in a historical context. “The [idea] spread very slowly at the start. People did not give it a whole lot of thought. It was during the Second World War that the spirit caught hold, because we were trying to hold the world together. World Wide Communion symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense. It emphasized that we are one in the Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

“Trying to hold the world together.” There’s a statement that really hit home for me. Even though we are not currently in a world war, some would say we have come dangerously close in recent years. And unfortunately, as the church has declined in numbers, we are doing all we can to hold *ourselves* together and have little energy or influence to make a difference in the world.

At least, that’s how it feels sometimes.

My sermon title, AT ALL TIMES AND IN ALL WAYS, is not actually included in either one of the scriptures we read today. But I chose it because it is the theme of this year’s Peace and Global Witness Offering. The final greeting and benediction from Second Thessalonians 3:16 reads, “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways.” *Peace at all times in all ways* is

the ultimate goal of the offering: to extend Christ's peace throughout our community and our world. Peace is what holds us together. Peace is what holds the world together.

Christ's peace is a spoken blessing which we offer to one another every Sunday as part of our worship service. But we must never be satisfied with words alone.

The lesson I read from First Peter encourages us to “seek peace and **pursue it.**” It is not enough that we wish and hope and pray for peace. Our prayers are so much more powerful when we give them hands that reach out and feet that go where the need is. It is not enough that we speak a blessing of peace. Our words of blessing mean so much more when we support them with actions.

We must **pursue peace.** AT ALL TIMES AND IN ALL WAYS. We must work for peace. Go after it. Support it. Promote it. Stand up for it. Join forces for it. And never give up on it.

The writer of First Peter says this is an important part of what defines us as Christians. Beginning with verse 10, he is quoting from Psalm 34: “Those who

desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

The other scripture lesson that we heard this morning was from the Gospel of John. These are words that Jesus speaks to his disciples around the table at their Last Supper together. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Very often I use this passage at funerals and memorial services, speaking to families and friends who are feeling lost and alone, who don’t know what to do or what the future looks like, who are experiencing their world turned upside down, who know only chaos - the opposite of peace. In his anticipation of how his friends will feel, Jesus gives them *his* peace. The peace that is beyond our ability to understand it. The peace that is incongruous to the chaos in which it resides.

It has to start within us. In the same way that we can only love our neighbor if we first have love for ourselves, we can only promote peace if we first have

peace within ourselves. Many of you will remember the song from decades ago:
Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. I think it needs a slight
change. *Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin IN me.*

Furthermore, we have to understand that peace cannot happen without justice. It's like expecting someone to not be hungry even though they've had nothing to eat. Or to wonder why they're cold when they have no coat. We who have more than enough must make sacrifices in order that others also have enough. Of course, we cannot hope to solve all the problems in the world, but we must do our part to make the world around us a better place.

“I do not give to you as the world gives,” Jesus said. The world turns its back, blaming the beggar for his own poverty. Jesus does not turn his back; he promised his disciples to never leave them alone. “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

The only way that any of us can know peace AT ALL TIMES AND IN ALL WAYS is to reconnect with Jesus, knowing that we are as his beloved friends, and accepting the invitation to sit at his table and be blessed with his words of peace. The only way for us to know the peace of Jesus is in receiving the bread

symbolizing his body “broken for you” and the wine symbolizing his blood “poured out for you.” The only way for us to know the peace of Jesus is to place ourselves at the foot of the cross as part of the crowd over which he prayed, “Father, forgive them; they don’t know what they’re doing.”

“Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called - that you might inherit a blessing. For ‘Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it’.”

“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace AT ALL TIMES AND IN ALL WAYS,” to the glory of God!

AMEN.